

"Why?"

Mark 15:21-38

March 28, 1971, Passion Sunday

John M. Buchanan

In the collected wisdom of the Church over the centuries this Sunday, the fifth in Lent, has been designated Passion Sunday. On this day throughout history Christians have turned their attention to the meaning and purpose of Christ's suffering. And by extension, the whole question of human suffering comes automatically into sharp focus on this day.

The story of his crucifixion, so very common to all of us, still has tremendous power. Regardless of the number of times it is heard, there is still a deep, abiding mystery - and - a compelling drama to it. In fact, the best sermons on this occasion are simply a retelling of the story: for it speaks eloquently without commentary and explanation. And I have always been tempted to read it, call your attention to the visible symbol of that story hanging in our sanctuary, and then sit down while we contemplate it together for twenty minutes or so.

And yet, the cross, the crude instrument of execution on which Jesus Christ died, has been adopted by western civilization as a symbol of many things: hospitals, jewelery, to name a few. Churches used to be constructed in the form of the cross, and in those churches one can find large crosses and small, beautiful crosses, ornate burnished brass cross, polished mahogany crosses. Needless to say, however, the cross of Christ was not beautiful. It was constructed of rough hewn lumber, with no thought for its aesthetic appeal. It was built to support the weight of an adult male while he hung on it and died. In the eyes and minds of first century Jews it was a symbol of horror and humiliation and shame. Cicero observed that crucifixion was the most horrible death known to the Romans and that it was never inflicted on a Roman citizen. It was an intentionally brutal way of execution, reserved for the worst kinds of criminals, done in such a conspicuous manner as to invite public participation by way of jeering and even stoning. Having seen a

crucifixion one might have second thoughts about running awry of Roman law.

It is necessary, I believe, to confront the unpleasant reality of the crucifixion: to get beyond our decorative and ornate crosses to the historic fact that one whom we know as Lord and Savior was executed on a cross as a blasphemer, traitor and trouble maker. Then, it seems to me, the power of the cross - the power of this story - regains its impact.

A story is told by John Sutherland Bonnell about a group of American clergyman visiting Russia's greatest art gallery, The Hermitage, in Lennigrad. "Preceding them was a contingent of workers and peasants conducted by a guide. Since they would shortly see a number of religious paintings, the guide explained to the group that the government treasured the works of art solely because of their artistic merit, even though, as he said, religion is the opiate of the people. Christ too, he said, favored the exploiters.

Suddenly the crowd came face to face with Rembrandt's famous painting "Descent from the Cross". Everyone stopped still before this masterpiece that depicts Jesus body being lowered from the cross. The group stood in complete silence as they gazed at the painting. One could almost read their thoughts. If this man on the cross were an exploiter, why did these rulers of the people wish to kill him? Wouldn't they have welcomed him to their number instead of destroying him? Besides there is compassion on his face even in death. Certainly he didn't look like an oppressor. His hands, too, are calloused like ours. Why of course, for he was a carpenter. And what gain did he make at the expense of the people? He has nothing at all but these poor bits of clothing he wears. Above all else there is a Godlike expression on his face.'

A look of comprehension came into the eyes of the foremost workman and he lifted his hand and pulled off his grimy cap. Instantly almost every other head was bared. They experienced the compelling power of the uplifted Lord who said, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.' (John 12:32)" [P. 35-36 He Speaks from the Cross]

That's a little of what the Church has in mind in observing Passion Sunday:

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an unobstructed look at the reality of what happened. And whenever I take that unobstructed view I find myself drawn to that forlorn cry that came from his lips as death neared - "Why?" My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

To understand how he could have said that we must understand the excruciating agony he was experiencing. Pain means different things to different people. We all have different thresholds of pain - and each of us responds to it differently. Crucifixion was designed to hurt a man physically - over an extended period of time - as no other form of corporal punishment could. And so, out of this wracking, tortuous hurt he could have asked "Why?" - even as we have asked.

But there was more to it than this, I believe. I spoke last week of the relationship between death and aloneness, and suggested that a child's questions about death are really pleas for love and affection and the assurance of safety. I suggested that when a child asks he needs an affirmation of your presence, more than academic information. I think the forlorn question of Jesus came, in part, from his aloneness; his sense of abandonment. Most men fear dying more than death itself. We know that dying is easier when friends and loved ones are near. Well Jesus was alone. His friends had deserted him: one had betrayed him, another denied knowing him, and the rest had fled. The loud cheering crowd that had welcomed him on the first day of the week had been reduced to those few curiosity seekers who loved a good crucifixion, and who passed the time of day hurling vindictive, humiliating insults at him. So I sense that he felt as alone as any man ever has.

As the hours dragged on and the relentless pain continued, and breathing became labored because of the inevitable shoulder separation and consequent collapse of the respiratory system - his life must have passed before his eyes. He noticed the soldiers gambling for his poor garment, and he must have recalled a Psalm he learned as a child. Number 22: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my

groaning? a company of evil doers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet . . . they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots."

And so, from the depths of lonely pain he cried out - not just his personal despair, but the ancient words of his suffering people: "Eloi, eloi, lama Sabacthan" - "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." Let's not back away from that: let's not explain that away. Jesus Christ our Lord felt totally abandoned - totally alone - totally lost - and expressed it as a true and honest man.

His "why" sounds similar to the "why" we often ask in situations of pain and suffering. When someone very dear to us dies, someone who wasn't nearly finished living, we are very much inclined to aim that same question to heaven. Where trouble comes and comes again we are very much inclined to ask "why me? What have I done to deserve this?" And in less dramatic, every day disappointments, when life loses its color and tomorrow doesn't seem worth living - all of us are inclined to ask "Why have you left me so alone?" It isn't always a request for information; sometimes we'd like an answer, but mostly we like to feel a presence - a support - a helping, loving friend to bear it with us.

There is, of course, no poverty of attempted answers to the question of human suffering. The first one to which we are inclined to turn, and the one offered to us most frequently is that suffering is a direct consequence of sin. Sometimes that's true. I believe there are unchanging principles built into the nature of things, which when broken will result in suffering. In terms of the laws of nature we have just begun to suffer for ignoring them for centuries. The ecological mess we've suddenly discovered we're in is the result of years of sin - and the bill for that one is not in yet; and when it comes it will be big.

I believe we are suffering as a people, for the sin of slavery and racism and oppression and bigotry. And that we and our children and their children

will continue to suffer until we do the penance required by the seriousness of our sin. I think we will suffer for years and decades as a consequence of our actions in South East Asia. When women and children are murdered and the act is called preventative response, I hear a Biblical question directed at each one of us - "Is it nothing to all ye who pass by?", and I worry about the suffering we will experience because of it.

Suffering is the result of sin - but not always, and we get into deep trouble when we attempt to make a universal principle out of that statement. That's the whole point of the Book of Job. Suffering sometimes occurs without and wrong having been done.

Another answer is that we learn and grow because of suffering. That, too, is valid up to a point. If I stick a finger into a flame - I will suffer pain: I will also learn a little bit about the danger of fire. Pain is the first warning signal of trouble and without it we wouldn't last very long. - But not all pain and suffering produces growth.

Likewise some suffering has redemptive power. When a man suffers on behalf of someone else, something redemptive and good sometimes happens. But there is nothing redemptive about an automobile accident, or terminal cancer.

I think the only legitimate answer to the question of suffering is that sometimes there is no answer. Suffering often has no intrinsic meaning and no intentionality. Certainly it is only by the strangest theological logic that we can possibly conclude that God causes human suffering.

The New Testament doesn't try to explain it: in fact, the only substantial treatment of human suffering in the Bible is the Book of Job, and that story concludes that there is no rational explanation. But the Bible does offer a presence: and the exceptionally good news that whatever we are suffering we can be comforted by the fact that the one who is our Lord knows how that feels too - because he's been there.

Jesus asked "why" and he didn't get an answer. So, I think it is

irresponsible to offer simple answers whenever we ask the question. He asked - but in the context of a deep faith in God, and that, I believe, is the help we need in coping with whatever suffering we are called to bear.

He asked his "why?" in the words of the 22nd Psalm. He knew the whole Psalm. He knew that the mood changes half-way through to thanksgiving and praise. He knew that the Psalm asked a desperate question and then moved to ringing, joyful affirmation - "Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down. . . . Posterity shall serve him, men shall tell of the Lord to the coming generation"

He knew, also, the words which follow Psalm 22: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want . . . even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me."

That is the only answer to human suffering: God is with us in it. That is the only answer to his own question. Somehow, incredibly God was with him: somehow God, himself, was deeply involved in that terrible suffering. Somehow, God himself was there participating in that drama - compelling all men to come near and see and feel.

Why? How to explain it? Again I'm very suspicious of easy answers. A great New Testament scholar put it this way: "Thousands of books have been written to explain the mystery, and I suppose I have read hundreds of them. My appreciation of the costly act itself has grown with the years, but I cannot in all honesty say that I am much closer to understanding so perilous and costly a mystery." [J. B. Phillips, Ibid. p. 69]

Why? How to explain it? I don't know. I do know that in that act God's love was supremely revealed. I do know that because of that act I am forgiven and given new life and put right with God. Why? I don't know. What I do know is that the death of Jesus Christ happened for you and for me. And that is enough.

Better to reflect on that quietly - or pray about it - or shed a tear

about it - or employ the mode of music and poetry:

"What language shall I borrow to thank thee dearest friend,

For this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?

O make me thine forever; and should I fainting be,

Lord, let me never, never,

Outlive my love to thee."

[O Sacred Head, Now Wounded, st. 3]

Amen.

Our father, we come again to stand beneath the cross of Jesus. As we
seek to comprehend, give us childlike grace to receive the gift there given.

Amen.